

## QUALITIES OF BEST PRACTICE IN TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES

Students of social studies need regular opportunities to investigate topics in depth. Complete “coverage” in social studies inevitably results in superficial and unengaging teaching, like painting a room—covering plenty of square feet but only one-thousandth of an inch thick. All the national reports and even some state standards recognize that real learning involves in-depth understanding of the complexities of human existence. *National Standards for History* urges “the use of more than a single source: of history books other than textbooks and of a rich variety of historical documents and artifacts that present alternative voices, accounts, and interpretations or perspectives on the past” (NCHS 1996, “Standards in Historical Thinking,” Standard 3, Internet version). *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* also highlights this need:

Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas within appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application. . . . The most effective teachers . . . select for emphasis the most useful landmark locations, the most representative case studies, the most inspiring models, the truly precedent-setting events, and the concepts and principles that their students must know and be able to apply in lives outside of school. (NCSS 1994, 163)

Yet with so many social studies fields—history, geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology—each including many topics, teachers have no choice but to accept that under *either* approach—thin coverage on everything or depth for a few areas—students won’t learn it all in twelve years of school. Covering less in more depth, however, not only ensures better understanding but increases the likelihood that students will pursue further inquiry on their own.

Students need opportunities to exercise choice and responsibility by choosing their own topics for inquiry. Particularly because social studies is meant to prepare students for *democratic* citizenship, student initiative is necessary in the classroom. Student choice need not mean chaos or avoidance of important content. Good teachers like Wayne Mraz provide lists of significant topics, give mini-lessons on thoughtfully choosing what to study, and conduct brief conferences to help students focus their work. This not only increases students’ engagement, but teaches an important academic skill needed for research projects in the upper grades and college—how to judiciously choose topics for reports and papers.

Social studies teaching should involve exploration of open questions that challenge students' thinking. Just about any study of human social existence brings up meaningful and often controversial questions—the pull between community and individual freedoms, scarcity of resources, particularity of local regions versus interrelatedness in a larger world. Reports and panels have recommended the use of large essential questions for many years, but abstract and brief prescriptions are not enough to help teachers change—just as they aren't enough to help students learn. Teachers need to ask questions that invite discussion, rather than merely check for memorized facts or seek confirmation of the teacher's own conclusions. And then, teachers must help students to examine both problematic and positive historical events honestly, and to analyze their meaning.

This open approach requires effective management of small-group learning. Teachers can assign brief learning-log entries and small-group tasks to prepare students to contribute to class discussion. Climate-setting activities are also essential, helping students respect one another's opinions and trust that their ideas will not be ridiculed. After a good discussion, students' follow-up reports and wall charts—or at the very least, end-of-class reflections—solidify learning so ideas do not evaporate when class is over.

To make concepts real, social studies must involve active participation in the classroom and the wider community. Real-world involvement is crucial for imparting the values of civic involvement and responsibility in our society. *Expectations of Excellence* goes to considerable length to describe the possibilities, including field trips, collaborative learning, and increased individual responsibility for learning. In spite of our overstuffed district curriculum guides, the task need not be overwhelming. Concepts in sociology, economics, and politics are often embodied right in the school building. Children of most ages can debate an issue, draft letters and proposals, seek changes in school procedures, or set up committees to accomplish some new goal. Student participation in these matters will, as an additional benefit, contribute to the social health of the school (Apple and Beane 1995). Active involvement can easily reach outside the school walls as well. Representatives of many social and governmental organizations happily visit classrooms. Parents who work in relevant fields make willing resource people. Genuine responses from community leaders to students' letters, proposals on community projects, and real advocacy are long remembered by students.



Yes, but . . . how can a teacher find time to prepare such projects if individuals or groups of students are working on different issues and there's no textbook for any of them?

Increasingly, fascinating and useful units and inquiry projects are available on the Internet. "History Lab" at <http://hlab.tielab.org>, for example (run by the Technology in Education Laboratory), features thirty-three projects using primary sources, which are themselves viewable on the Web. A thematic approach, as outlined in Tarry Lindquist's *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* (2002), makes student participation easier to include in the curriculum. Many strategies are described in Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy's *Social Studies Excursions, K–3* (2003), Stephanie Steffey and Wendy Hood's *If This Is Social Studies, Why Isn't It Boring?* (1994), and David Kobrin's *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources* (1996). When teachers take a thematic approach to the subject, they find that many of the items listed in their social studies curriculum guides are automatically covered.

Social studies should involve students in both independent inquiry and cooperative learning in order to build skills and habits needed for lifelong, responsible learning. Social studies classes can easily use cooperative learning. Inexperienced kids will need training, but this in itself is an important skill throughout students' schooling as well as their adult lives. Then, it is wise to balance individual and group work. Students differ in their learning styles. A "classroom workshop" structure, in which students research topics of their own choosing while the teacher holds brief one-to-one conferences, is a highly efficient way of immersing children in individual study. These two organizational structures—cooperative groups and classroom workshop—are also essential tools for making a nontracked, heterogeneous classroom work (see Chapter 8 for descriptions of these strategies).

Social studies reading should include engaging real-world documents and not just textbooks. Textbooks present many limitations for effective learning. They are difficult to read because they are stuffed with facts, and yet nothing is explored in depth. Students find them boring. And especially problematic, they generally present just one view of events, compared with the many intense and engaging controversies that surround so many social studies topics. Primary sources, in contrast, bring history to life. Articles from newspapers, magazines, and the Internet abound. An excellent example is *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History* (2004), a five-volume set of primary documents and materials. To ensure that kids become lifelong readers, able to evaluate many points of view on topics important to their lives, we must help them get well into the habit of reading widely in school.

Social studies should involve students in writing, observing, discussing, and debating to ensure their active participation in learning. Reports and studies all recommend active learning, but teachers often picture writing, discussion, or group work as time-consuming add-ons. They imagine essays that take days for kids to write and nights for teachers to grade. But activities can be brief and informal—taking only moments to help students focus, consider a problem, or reflect on the material. Students can write for two minutes at the beginning of the period to recollect main points covered the day before. They can stop in the middle of the class to talk for five minutes in pairs or threes about possible solutions to a problem. At the end of class, they can reflect on a notecard about what they've learned or don't understand.

Modes other than lecturing and quizzes are important tools to advance learning of the subject matter. To review concepts in a unit, for example,

Diane Deacy has her sixth graders at Washington Irving School in Chicago make what she calls ABC charts. Each student develops her own alphabet chart using words she identifies from the unit (grouping X, Y, and Z together, since words beginning with these letters are rare). On butcher paper, each student creates her chart with twenty-four squares, drawing a representation and writing a brief explanation in each square. Students naturally review the material they've studied while admiring each other's charts.

Writing, drawing, and other forms of expression help students create new understandings for themselves. As *Expectations of Excellence* puts it:

Students . . . do not passively receive or copy curriculum content; rather, they actively process it by relating it to what they already know (or think they know) about the topic. Instead of relying on rote learning methods, they strive to make sense of what they are learning by developing a network of connections that link the new content to preexisting knowledge and beliefs anchored in their prior experience. (NCSS 1994, 169)

Social studies learning should build on students' prior knowledge of their lives and communities, rather than assuming they know nothing about the subject. It is usual media practice to bash education by recounting the geography or history bloopers kids may write for quizzes. Yet children listen far more closely to adult conversation than we like to acknowledge, and they sense issues and paradoxes in their community, school, and families much more sharply than we realize. When we do take notice, many of us find this phenomenon alternately cute and threatening.

We do far better to find out just how much children *do* know about the world around them and build our teaching on that. By drawing out and building on this prior knowledge, we show how social studies concepts are relevant to children's lives, and not just abstract words.

Of course, children grasp more complexities as they move up the grades and grow more aware of the wider world and social interactions around them. Traditional social studies curricula have followed an "expanding environments" formula for elementary grades, starting with the family and working outward. More recently, however, educators have developed ways to introduce young children to history, geography, and other topics in forms they can grasp. *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, by Linda Levstik and Keith Barton (2000), provides detailed guidance along with vignettes of elementary school teachers involving children in active historical inquiry.

Social studies should explore the full variety of cultures found in America, including students' own backgrounds and other cultures' approaches to various social studies concepts. The acrimonious debate over "our common heritage" versus study of individual ethnic groups has sadly obscured much of the real meaning in both these options. First, minority children are not the only ones who have been cut off from their own history. Most students in any age group or social stratum know little of the historical and political developments that affected their families and forebears. History, politics, economics, culture, folklore—all become more meaningful to students through interviews with parents, grandparents, neighbors, and other adults. Children of minority backgrounds especially tend to see school as disconnected from their own lives. However, once the connection is made, study of other cultural groups creates an understanding of the common struggles and aspirations of various groups, and an appreciation of their rich particularity. Far from engendering divisiveness, this approach helps eradicate it.

What is crucial is *how* these things are studied. We've observed children endure profound boredom as a teacher demanded memorization of the principal grain crops of various African countries. Such methods do not reconnect children with history but further alienate them. In contrast, when students make choices, discover facts that they find significant in their own family backgrounds, and share them with mutual respect, they not only feel pride in their own heritages, they also become more excited about history and geography and culture in general—and perhaps even learn to critique and evaluate aspects of their own past, as well as to honor them.

Social studies should avoid tracking of students because it deprives various groups of the knowledge essential to their citizenship. The *National Standards for History* is eloquent on this matter:

Standards in and of themselves cannot ensure remediation of the pervasive inequalities in the educational opportunities currently available to students. The roots of these problems are deep and widely manifested in gross inequities in school financing, in resource allocations, and in practices of discriminatory "lower tracks" and "dumbed-down" curricula that continue to deny large sectors of the nation's children equal educational opportunity. . . . Every child is entitled to and must have equal access to excellence in the goals their teachers strive to help them achieve and in the

instructional resources and opportunities required to reach those ends. Nothing less is acceptable in a democratic society. (NCHS 1996, "Three Policy Issues," Internet version)

As more educators contemplate the social and racial implications of tracking, they realize they must find alternatives. Research indicates that tracked classes do not even benefit high-track students as much as once claimed, but they do systematically discourage the lower-achieving ones. Particularly in social studies, students of various backgrounds can benefit by hearing from one another (Wynne and Malcolm 1999).

Social studies evaluation must reflect the importance of students' thinking and help prepare students to be responsible citizens, rather than rewarding memorization of decontextualized facts. In the history class described at the beginning of this chapter, Wayne Mraz has each small group of students compose a test question, evaluate the answers written by individual students from another group, and then review answers with the test takers. This may take longer than a traditional quiz, but it ensures a tremendous amount of learning. Evaluation in Mraz' classes is not just time spent checking on students or tallying bubbles on a score sheet; it's another occasion for learning.

Because the goal of social studies education in the national reports and many state standards documents is not just acquisition of information, but preparation for democratic citizenship, it's obvious that evaluation in social studies should serve that goal. Thus, perhaps more than in any other subject, evaluation in social studies must involve reflective *dialogue* between teacher and student. Yes, we can ask students to show they have specific knowledge of a subject. But every evaluation should also include larger questions; for example, in the student's view, what constitutes a good historian (or history book, or observer of folk traditions)? We should ask *how* students have learned about families or governments or economic systems. Students should analyze the significance, implications, and human issues within the material studied. Then the answers should be valued by extending discussion out from them, rather than leaving tests to be simply graded and forgotten.

However, for students to feel free to speak their minds, we must have many occasions when their ideas are *not* evaluated. Students should be able to select essays and products they will submit for evaluation, out of a larger portfolio, to maintain a zone of safety for expression that is risky, tentative, or unresolved.

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES*****Increase******Decrease***

In-depth study of topics in each social studies field, in which students make choices about what to study	Cursory coverage of a lockstep curriculum that includes everything but allows no time for deeper understanding of topics
Activities that engage students in inquiry and problem solving about significant human issues	Memorization of isolated facts in textbooks
Student decision making and participation in wider community affairs, to build a sense of responsibility for their school and community	Isolation from the actual exercise of responsible citizenship; emphasis only on reading about such topics
Participation in interactive and cooperative classroom study processes that bring together students of all ability levels	Lecture classes in which students sit passively; classes in which lower-achieving students are deprived of knowledge and opportunities to learn
Integration of social studies with other areas of the curriculum; use of real-world reading	Narrowing social studies activity to include only textbook reading and test taking
Richer content in elementary grades, using children's prior knowledge, from psychology, sociology, economics, and political science, as well as history and geography; younger students' experience can relate to social institutions and problems of everyday living	Assumption that students are ignorant about or uninterested in issues raised in social studies
Students' sense of connection with American and global history, diverse social groups, and the environment that surrounds them	Postponement of significant curriculum until secondary grades
Inquiry about students' cultural groups and others in their school and community, thus building ownership in the curriculum	Use of curriculum restricted to only one dominant cultural heritage
Use of evaluation that involves further learning and that promotes responsible citizenship and open expression of ideas	Use of curriculum that leaves students disconnected from and unexcited about social studies topics
	Assessments only at the end of a unit or grading period; assessments that test only factual knowledge or memorization